STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 79 | Number 2 (Spring 2020) pps. 192-194

The Bone and Sinew of the Land: America's Forgotten Black Pioneers and the Struggle for Equality

Jennifer Harbour
University of Nebraska Omaha

ISSN 0003-4827

Through the political, educational, and economic transitions supported by Pitchlynn and others, readers gain insight into the work of Choctaw elites as they sought to build a new Choctaw Nation west of the Mississippi River. For his final case study Kelderman turns to Ojibwe authors and the romanticized image of the Indian headman. Even as American officials saw "real political value in representing Ojibwe leaders through the trope of the sympathetic Indian chief" (179), Ojibwe writers like George Copway sought to promote images of Ojibwe communities and politics that could not be so easily distilled.

Authorized Agents addresses each of the four cases with the complexity they deserve, and Kelderman never pushes his argument beyond what the evidence allows. Although the nature of the project results in case studies that don't flow smoothly from one to the next, each chapter offers a critical perspective that pushes readers to think differently about how to understand and work with the writings of Native peoples in the nineteenth century.

The Bone and Sinew of the Land: America's Forgotten Black Pioneers and the Struggle for Equality, by Anna-Lisa Cox. New York: PublicAffairs, 2018. xviii, 280 pp. Maps, notes, index. $28.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Jennifer Harbour is associate professor of black studies and women's studies at the University of Nebraska Omaha. She is the author of *Organizing Freedom: Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest* (2020).

Anna-Lisa Cox's new monograph tells the story of black farming settlements in the antebellum and wartime Old Northwest (what is present-day Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin). In her introduction, Cox argues that, while her deliberate use of the words *pioneer* and *frontier* may seem problematic and redolent of indigenous genocide, she aims to engage the historiography by framing the lost history of "The First Great Migration" as agricultural, ambitious, and decidedly African American. The growing communities that resulted from that migration, she posits, spread across five states with free people who envisioned themselves as farmers with citizenship rights. How on earth, Cox wonders, did historians overlook where and how black men and women became pioneers on the land carved out by the Northwest Territory in 1787? This space was to date the largest piece of American land to be free from slavery—at least in theory. The territory also offered equal voting rights to property-owning men, thus making it a safe haven for hundreds of black people who had the money and means to migrate and settle.

Cox's discovery and analysis of more than 300 African American communities shows what historians have only just begun to understand: black people deliberately settled this land because they sought a new space in which to pursue equality. Cox's research is meticulous, and she clearly defines the parameters of her study: she sought only people who owned property and who self-identified as farmers. Her historical subjects include neither urban dwellers nor rural "entrepreneurs" who owed businesses such as mills, general stores, and smitheries. Even when she discovered fascinating people who made their living as teachers or pastors, she deliberately excluded them. This degree of specificity allows Cox to cast her historical subjects as Jeffersonian in nature—men and women who employed westward expansion, and its language of the ideal democratic agrarian society, to capitalize on the opportunity to settle in the new, more equitable America. Of course, like the already present indigenous populations, African Americans quickly discovered that these rural enclaves were heavily populated by white racists who had no intention of sharing their spaces.

Cox organizes her study into nine chapters, each recounting a narrative oriented to reveal how diverse the midwestern frontier actually was, a striking characteristic for historians who once believed that the real substantive action in the West only began with Bleeding Kansas. In flowing chapters with titles like "Gibson County, Indiana, 1828" (chap. 3), "Cincinnati, 1841" (chap. 6), and "A History of Repeated Injuries and Usurpations" (chap. 9), Cox provides a series of historical vignettes. These will undoubtedly whet the appetite for a deeper understanding of how tightly knit kinfolk refused to fail in their demanding emotional and physical labor. Each of these sections describes seemingly disparate situations; African Americans experienced an incalculable range of aggressions from the land, the law, and the social landscape. Cox uses these scenarios to argue that black pioneers insisted on being an *integral* part of the new and expanding nation. Readers seeking fascinating stories of this place and period will find stories of marriage and romance, crime and punishment, law and retribution. There are fights, fires, friendships, and fierce competition.

This work builds on Cox's first book-length study, *A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith* (2006), which chronicled white and black inhabitants of Covert, Michigan. In that town, Cox discovered, black Michiganders built extraordinary postbellum interracial friendships and partnerships with their white counterparts. That work was a welcome addition to the oft-ignored field of midwestern history, in part because of her unrelenting search for evidence. Admirably, Cox also visited these communities and interviewed the

descendants of the community's founders. No historian of any marginalized group could quibble with such painstaking research, and it is a testament to Cox's commitment to her historical subjects that she tells their story in such artistic and heartfelt prose. It is this insistence upon portraying the most positive aspects of the lives of these black pioneers, however, that occasionally comes across as hyperbolic. For instance, in the last few sentences of the book, Cox writes that the black pioneers "rose up to trample tyranny and to bring the blessings of liberty and equality along the length and breadth of the land" (200). It is likely that the black settlers themselves felt this way, especially because records such as speeches, diaries, letters, sermons, and especially black political convention records use this exalted language. Given the rancor and hostility of white racism and white supremacy *everywhere* in America, however, it would seem that black Americans did not actually trample tyranny, but instead constantly dreamt of doing so.

In God's Presence: Chaplains, Missionaries, and Religious Space during the American Civil War, by Benjamin L. Miller. Modern War Studies. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. xi, 256 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Timothy Wesley is associate professor of history at Austin Peay State University. He is the author *The Politics of Faith during the Civil War* (2013).

Benjamin Miller's impressive *In God's Presence* is first and foremost a spatial study of religious life "under the gun." Evaluating the wartime interactions between spiritual captains and the men to whom they ministered based largely on the physical settings in which such interactions occurred allows Miller to make clear the vitally malleable nature of "religious space." But it is not solely in highlighting the differences between the understood religious realm, what the author calls the "sacred space" of churches and religious ceremonies, and the newly contested but still "profane" spaces of the camp, battlefield, and hospital that makes Miller's effort significant. To the contrary, for while the author documents in detail the wartime clergy's efforts to sacralize the numerous environments through which they were compelled to lead their beleaguered flock, arguably more memorable in Miller's offering is simply the constancy of the shepherds themselves.

Most of the men who served in America's Civil War armies were religious to one extent or another. Their spirituality had been forged in an antebellum world of separate public and sacred spheres, the latter's static spaces adding meaning to their faith and providing the context